

ERT: rupture, resistance and restoration of Greek public broadcasting

**for conference on Journalism in Times of Crisis
at University of Limerick 7 April 2016**

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Imagine, if one day in 2013, the government announced it was closing RTE forever at midnight.

This is what happened in Greece on 11 June 2013. There was no warning. I was in Athens. The first tweet seemed like a chimera, but then the twitter stream was full of it. I turned on the tv, where the station was covering its own closure, first with disbelief and then with defiance. It was a non-stop stream of denunciation of the government and the troika, whether talking heads in studio or politicians speaking to the crowd gathering outside the station. Syriza MPs were breathing fire.

The government was making this momentous move by ministerial decree without reference to the parliament or even the cabinet. Two of the three government parties were not supporting it. The troika had decreed that 2000 public sector jobs were to go by July and this was a way of doing that in one fell swoop. In fact, there were 2650 employed in ERT, putting them ahead of the game. People I met kept calling it a 'coup d'etat'.

There was a call to come to the ERT station at Aghia Paraskevi on the outskirts of Athens at 7pm. A call I answered. I realised that it would be a long night, expecting that riot police would come in at midnight and forcibly close down the station. It was a balmy summer evening and people were steaming through the gates to join others, who were waving flags, listening to speeches, talking to friends. There were thousands eventually. I was very moved by the defiance expressed in singing songs of struggle.

As the darkness fell, there was more apprehension about what was going to happen at midnight. Around 10pm, word went around that the transmitters were going down all over Greece and by 11:15 ERT was off air in Athens too. So midnight was something of an anti-climax.

The protest turned into an occupation. New territory was being charted now. The journalists and other employees of ERT decided to keep broadcasting. Various internet sites carried the broadcasts. The European Broadcasting Union gave its moral and technical support. The KKE gave over the frequency of its tv service to ERT for long periods.

After some hours outside, I found my way inside the station. There I discovered that many people as well as ERT employees were in there, including Syriza MPs, who were on a rota to be sure that there were at least 20 of them there at any given time. I spoke to many people about why they were occupying the station. Some of those who were its sharpest critics were now its fiercest defenders. They knew it was stuffed with political appointees and gave government too easy a ride, but they were defending public broadcasting as it could be.

Public broadcasting as it could be was what it became during these days. It was riveting television at times: splendid music, political satire, alternative documentaries, talking heads telling the truth about the government and the troika, even about the pressures on ERT that made it other than what it should have been, as well as constant coverage of the occupation itself. The scene outside was like a festival at times. There were memorable moments when people who gathered waved their flags, danced, clenched their fists, sang traditional anthems of the Greek left, enacting a continuity of struggles of past and present, evoking memory of so much that had been won and lost, stirring hope of taking back the world being taken away from us.

The continuing broadcasts on ERT were true public service broadcasting, a sustained expression of democracy, as well as a political humiliation of the government.

As I was frequently updating on the social networks, I began receiving calls requesting me to do media interviews in Ireland. I emphasised that ERT was the equivalent of RTE that I often felt that RTE spoke with the voice of the masters of the universe, but I would come to defend it if there was such a move against it. Indeed, I would be

delighted to see RTE do the sort of broadcasting that was being done on ERT during the occupation.

Some journalists in Ireland organised a solidarity demonstration at the Greek embassy in Dublin. Emma O'Kelly of the NUJ broadcasting branch asked me to get them a direct contact with ERT journalists, so I made my way to the newsroom to do that. I was directed to Yiannis Fasoulas, who announced on air that I was there. Then they put me in a studio, where I spoke of the sudden and shocking closure of ERT in a wider context, situating the immediate events within longer trajectories, seeing the closure of this public broadcaster within a larger and longer dismantling of the public dimension of everything, even an erosion of a public service ethos within the public service.

During the 2nd day, it lashed rain, putting a damper on the atmosphere outside the station. Nevertheless, many stayed out there under umbrellas, while many more streamed inside the station. One man started screaming about the lack of organisation and security. Although it was crowded and potentially dangerous, it was a remarkably harmonious self-organised community. People stood around a grand piano and sang songs, including *Imagine*. They sat around and told their stories and shared their food.

There were rumours of the government falling and a new election happening soon. There was a lot going on in parliament and government buildings too on the day. The 3rd day was a general strike, which was called to protest the closure of ERT. Many more thousands arrived for the rally at ERT than it was impossible to get into the grounds of the station and spilled out into the street.

With so much happening in Athens, I was tempted to cancel my plans for a weekend trip to Evia. However, I had arranged to visit friends I hadn't seen in many years. Moreover, it might be good to see how it all looked from there and perhaps to unwind a bit. On Sunday night in Evia, we attended a Syriza rally in Chalkida. This town, where Aristotle died, was alive with people chatting in the cafés and walking along the promenade by the sea. On the main square, Syriza was showing ERT on a big screen as a protest against its closure. Much of the broadcast was the concert taking place at Aghia Paraskevi.

The next night I attended a Syriza rally in Syntagma Square. The high point was a speech by Alexis Tsipras, somewhat in pre-election mode, bidding Samaras 'Kali nichta' (good night), as it still seemed as if the government could fall and a new election would come soon. That night the news came that a court ruling had ordered that ERT transmissions be restored, pending restructuring, an order that the government did not implement. Over the course of the crisis, it had been remarkable to see how this class, which has made the laws and dominated such institutions, had blatantly defied them and gone for naked authoritarian rule instead. It was the same when a court ruled substantial sections of the memorandum unconstitutional and they implemented them regardlessly.

When I returned to Dublin, I checked out ERT transmissions several times every day and watched the concert every night. I did my best to remind people, especially journalists, that the struggle was still ongoing, even though it fell off the international news agenda all too quickly. ERT Open carried on in legal limbo, on an oppositional basis and without pay. They continued to broadcast television from Athens and Thessaloniki and radio from many regional centres and to update on their website and social media. These broadcasts were a sustained democratic expression and political humiliation of the government of Greece. The prospect of election receded, however, because Pasok would put up with anything to stay in power.

Meanwhile, the government didn't fall, but was re-formed after Dimar left. A number of politicians who failed to be elected became ministers. A channel called DT appeared to hold the place of ERT until one called NERIT was launched. It ran old dramas and documentaries. One film maker announced that he would sue for bringing his work into disrepute on this 'despicable channel'. ERT workers were offered the prospect of short contracts at reduced wages, which they rejected.

ERT carried on broadcasting. The whole operation was more organised than in those first shocking and frenetic days. Whatever happened next, it would go down in history as a formidable example of workers' control of the means of production and true public broadcasting with broad democratic participation. On 19 August, I was sorry to learn that the EBU was deserting ERT and supporting the government's replacement service.

In late August, I went to ERA Zakynthos, the ERT radio station on the island and met people running and occupying the station as well as people there for a meeting of the teacher's strike committee. I was interviewed on air about the crisis in Ireland and Greece. The studio, attractively decorated with big colourful panels, was full of camp beds for those occupying it during the nights. As in Athens, no one knew when the riot police might arrive to forcibly shut it down.

On 7 November, I woke up to news that riot police invaded ERT at Aghia Paraskevi and evicted those working there. This dominated the whole day for me. I followed it on social media all day. They were still broadcasting outside the gates. On 10 November, I watched the debate in the Greek parliament on a no confidence motion in the government relation to ERT, in which Syriza said all the right things, but the government survived.

There was still tv broadcasting from Thessaloniki and radio from other centres. ERT Open continued on the internet. They set up a new office across the road in Aghia Paraskevi to be in sight of what they lost and to what they intended to return. Nineteen regional radio stations remained open. There were still 700 of the 2650 workers with ERT Open.

In 2014 I was back on the air on ERA-Zakynthos. It was interesting to note the differences from the year before. When I was last there, it was all hands on deck, even with camp beds in the station, where it was being occupied 24/7 in case of riot police coming to close it down. It was now a scaled-down, but still determined, operation. The camp beds were gone and they only broadcast for a hour a day. Petros Pomonis, the manager of the station, interviewed me, focusing again on the crisis in Ireland and Greece and the global forces underlying it.

For 2 years broadcasting continued under difficult conditions and at considerable cost to those involved. 18 ERT workers had died in ways that were attributed to the shock and stress of the ERT rupture and resistance: suicides, heart attacks, cancer, accidents.

On 25 January 2015, there was finally a general election. Syriza won. They announced that they would keep their election promise to reconstitute ERT. Legislation would be introduced and workers would be rehired.

However, it did not go as many ERT workers and Syriza voters hoped. One disappointment was the appointment of Lambis Tagmatarchis to be CEO, who was seen as representing the old ERT and the not transformation of ERT after 2013. The government minister in charge was Nikos Pappas, on the right of Syriza and distrusted by the left.

ERT came back on air on 11 June, two years to the day that it was shut down.

However, ERT was not reconstituted in the way Syriza had promised. ERT Open had developed detailed proposals for new ERT. Syriza in government, instead of affirming and building on what this popular struggle had achieved, disregarded the popular demand for a new model of public broadcasting, based on critical and creative programming and workers self-management. Instead, they reinstated the old order and hierarchical management. Instead of public broadcasting, it became government broadcasting, as it had been previously, except that Syriza was now the government whose line it privileged.

ERT Open, which was to be a temporary project to be dissolved when ERT was reconstituted, decided it had to carry on after all.

So it wasn't happily ever after. ERT is back on air for now, but unsatisfactorily and precariously.

During the dramatic negotiations, which broke Syriza, during the night of 12-13 July 2015, there was a demand for ERT to be closed down again. This didn't happen, although there was capitulation to an agreement involving extensive privatisation of public property and expropriation of social wealth. It could still happen. The situation is volatile.

This is a story within a larger story. For more on the wider context, there is my book [*The Syriza Wave*](#) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017).

